

contributor, who can wring memorable verse out of immigrant malapropisms; another unfamiliar name to check out.

Irish Studies Programs in America increasingly influence the terms on which Irish poetry is read—maybe even written—at home. It would provide a healthy (and ironic) corrective, broadening the horizons of Irish readers and writers alike, if we were to keep abreast of the best American poetry of the present, discovering those very poets whom the Irish Studies specialists miss in their rush to “foreground” all things Hibernian. Incredible though it may seem in the Internet age, contemporary American poets have yet to be read and experienced in Ireland as our contemporaries. Time surely for the Donald Hall equivalent of *The Godfather Part III*...

WHAT I HEARD THERE



Eamon Grennan

The very first contact with American poetry that I remember happened in secondary school, with the Cistercian monks of Roscrea. Among the first poems I had to read there, or get off by heart, were two by American poets. One was “Barbara Fritchie.” The heroine’s patriotic bravura made an unforgettable picture, and it had a good thumping rhythm to match: “Shoot if you must this old grey head/ But spare your country’s flag”, she said. Fine sentiments, and well expressed. The nerves were struck and responded. The picture it made stayed with me, the simple rhythmic equivalent of a cartoon.

But the first poem that made an impression that was at once sensuous and in some way intellectual—that made me think sensuously, made me turn the picture of the poem into a thing of thought that passed beyond the sheer pre-cognitive pleasure of rhythm—was also an American poem, although its Americanness was in no way the point. It was a poem, however, that made me have a conscious feeling for the way words could evoke something, something in the actual world. That, in fact, was the subject of Longfellow’s “Chaucer”, a conjuring by the American poet (he had written, we knew, the more patently American *Hiawatha*) of the way the palpable world of fields and trees and the crowing cock, of farmland,

of nature (some of it within spitting distance of our classroom), was translated into words by the first great poet of English, and how these words in turn gave back what they spoke of—"and as I read /I hear the crowing cock, I hear the note /Of lark and linnet, and from every page / Rise odors of ploughed field or flowery mead." Taken simply, the fact that this is an American poem is unimportant. What was important, I guess, was that a poem was waking me up to what a poem could do. Was making me conscious of something important in the art itself, in language itself as it operated in a poem.

Although the poet's nationality wasn't important to me at that point, on present reflection I'd say that what was being noted by Longfellow was probably not unconnected to his being an American, a poet on the cusp between English and American literature, trying in his own way (in the 1840s and 1850s and 1860s) to be part of a conscious beginning, a beginning that would make something peculiarly American happen in the English language, make something specifically American rise from the page. But I couldn't have had any such thought then. I was simply possessed by the thought of crowing cock and lark and linnet, by the idea (or, better, the sensation) that "from every page / Rise odors of ploughed field or flowery mead." I suppose other poems could have given me a similar experience. But this is the one I remember. So when I think of myself as a reader of poems, this is the inaugural moment.

The next connection that made a conscious impression on me occurred when I was at university, in UCD (1960-64). In our courses we read no American poetry (although Denis Donoghue often "put in allusions" to some of them). In the literary world outside the classroom, however (a literary world whose axis ran from Main Hall across Stephen's Green, swerving through Dwyer's pub on the corner of the Green and Leeson Street), Eliot and Pound were part of our thoughts and literary chatter, and names like Stevens, and Ransom and Wilbur began to chime for me. I got ear-drunk on the eccentric tonalities of "Prufrock", and fell under the spell of the early Pound. The accents of those bravura transformations of Cino ("Bah! I have sung women in three cities / But it is all the same: / And I will sing of the sun...") or the tough sentimentality of his plainspokenness, with the frisson of its odd archaic touches ("I am homesick after mine own kind /Oh I know that there are folk about me, friendly faces, / But I am homesick after mine own kind") brought the sound of a voice that seemed free, romantic and modern all at once. It struck some emotional nerve, and (in spite, or maybe because of its Browningsque mimicry of old colloquialism) it spoke loud and clear of some emotional atmosphere which was very pressing when I was nineteen or twenty. Along with Eliot's, such language was alive in a way nothing met before seemed

to be. It was alive, immediate, and letting poetry be in the world in a novel, surprising way. I remember sitting up late under a shaded lamp, in the small bedroom I shared with my brother in our house on Clareville Road, reading the early Pound, reading “Pruffrock” and *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, and writing pastiches of them all. (Baritone verses, for example, about some semi-mystical state or another—full of gardens and fountains, flames and whispering children, and some palpable but unspoken erotic presence, all of which made Liam Hourican—then editor of *St Stephens*—ask if I thought that a re-write of *Four Quartets* was really necessary.) But these pastiches, awful as they must have been, gave me the kind of satisfaction natural enough to the aspiring writer, since I thought I’d tapped into a vein of tonal authenticity, thought that the poems I was writing were true because they sounded like what was true to my ear, the poems of Pound and Eliot.

(Biographical reminiscence: A couple of years after that I found myself sitting in a room in Spoleto with the white-haired, silent EP himself—silent while Charles Olson and Desmond O’Grady and I [a year out of college, eager and astonished] nattered on about Dublin and Joyce and the Lord knows what. EP kept silently leafing through the book I’d handed him for his signature—the slategrey paperback of his *Faber Selected Poems*, edited by Eliot. He was sitting, I remember, in a ray of light from a shuttered window: aureole of white hair, face all cubist angles. Olson, prompted *il miglior fabbro* at intervals: *Why don’t you sign the boy’s book, EP? ... more leafing through the pages... Come on, EP, maybe you could sign the boy’s book? ...* further leafing. I noted the veined hands, the fingers, the mute self-containment, a kind of electric repose. Then, in what sounded like a strong Dublin accent, Pound was speaking, breaking his uncanny silence, saying, *Don’t I haveta read it first!* And then the deed was done, the boy’s book signed—my name misspelled, no matter—and that moment of peculiar, dreamy intensity was over. End of reminiscence.)

Ransom, Wilbur and Stevens were also discovered at this time. What did I find there? Some sense of formal manner, I guess, some sort of verbal grace plus energy not to be found closer to home. Of course there was Yeats, but Yeats was on the high and mighty side. And of course there was Kavanagh, not at all high and mighty, and that was good, that was necessary, nourishing. But these Americans were different. It had something to do with voice, accent, speed, buoyancy of language, and an ability to mix modes in surprising ways, to be graceful and colloquial, immediate and ceremonial all at once. I remember lugging about the library copy of the dark-blue-covered *Collected Poems* of Wallace Stevens, from Dwyer’s to late-night sausages and chips and coffee in Gaj’s Restaurant on Baggot Street, and trying without success to convince

Brendan Kennelly and Eavan Boland of Stevens' merits, the lovely rhetorical sweeps ("We live in an old chaos of the sun / Or old dependency of day and night") which were at the same time slightly self-mocking, the intellectual language that seemed at the same time lyrical extravaganza—his odd, stirring, unfamiliar verbal cocktails: "O blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, / The maker's rage to order words of the sea, / Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." Keener sounds indeed, whatever they meant. In Stevens and in the lesser, but wonderfully approachable likes of Wilbur and Ransom, I imagine now, I must have been hearing some sort of brave new world of words, and relishing it.

When I went, almost by accident, to graduate school in America and studied Renaissance literature and the like—ultimately writing a dissertation on Shakespeare's History Plays—I didn't have much time for expanding my modern and contemporary horizons. But an American poet I discovered with excitement at that time was W. S. Merwin, whose oddly anonymous yet distinct lyrical voice came through the strange small poems gathered in collections like *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders*, poems that managed to strike a metaphysical note but in a silence-filled free verse idiom of lovely tactility, of minute attention to the physical world: "Early mist / mountains like a rack of dishes / in a house I love / far mountains / last night the stars for a while / stopped trembling / and this morning the light will speak to me / of what concerns me." Beguiling and hypnotic, such cadences were at once foreign and familiar, this lyrical anonymity the very voice, it seemed, of poetry itself. But mostly, aside from incidental connections with what was going on in the literary life of Cambridge—centred on Gordon Cairnie's Grolier Bookshop, on Peter O'Malley's bar (The Plough and the Stars, on Mass. Avenue), on Jim Randall, and on a clatter of contemporaries (Derek Mahon there for a while, James Tate, Tom Lux, Bill Corbett, Sam Cornish, Paul Hannigan, others)—poetry for me, in any practical sense, at least, mostly went underground for the years of graduate school, and its immediate aftermath of a teaching job, marriage and children.

But having returned to Ireland in 1977-78 on a year's leave, I began to sink more deeply into American poetry again, reading for sustenance (as I began to write in earnest) poets like Merwin, Bishop, Kunitz, Roethke, Snyder, Williams, Berryman, Lowell, and especially James Wright, along with the usual Irish suspects, among them my own contemporaries. In Wright and Williams and Snyder and Roethke and Kunitz I found voices that dealt with the natural world in a way that sang to me: it was relaxed, colloquial, unshowy, but at the same time it allowed for some edge of celebratory intent, some late Romantic tinge of the secular-spiritual that suit-

ed or answered something in my own instinct, nature, need for expression. (I should add that only one English poet was similarly nourishing for me, and that was Ted Hughes, whose alert senses and muscled tongue brought his violent but believably immediate world entirely and compellingly alive.)

Among these Americans, the sense of form was never an enforcement, seemed always a coaxing to get something shapely and right, and I liked that. I'd look out the window in Ballymoney, County Wexford, and see the Irish Sea (even Wales, they said, on a clear day), and a field of grass, and trees and hedges and birds; then I'd turn to the pages of Snyder or Williams or Roethke or Wright or Bishop or Kinnell and hear lyrical voices that, although far away from this actual landscape, were actually offering me some sort of medium in which to deal with what I saw. I think it must be for this reason that I put "Facts of Life, Ballymoney" as the opening poem in my first collection, *Wildly for Days* (1983). When Derek Mahon read that poem (it had appeared in David Marcus's "New Irish Writing" page in the *Irish Press*), he said (it was intended as a compliment) that it sounded like a translation from the French. In fact, I guess, it was a sort of translation—but from the American—pushing my own experience of myself and of the Irish landscape I was encountering through the filter of an "American" style. I'm saying this in retrospect, of course, but it feels something like the truth. What I found in these American voices was a relaxed middle range of poetic speech capable—as speech—of rising towards some ampler celebratory pitch or tone, and able to invoke and touch the edges of something like (I hesitate to use the word, but no other seems to do the job) mystery, some sort of secular fringe of grace radiating out of a deep, pragmatic immersion in matter, in the grainy, friable, actual, vital matter of the world. Maybe you'll hear it—to pick just one example among a legion of possibilities—in a random snatch of Williams, from *Paterson*:

An eternity of bird and bush,
resolved. An unraveling;
the confused streams aligned, side
by side, speaking! Sound

married to strength, a strength
of falling—from a height! ...

And in the brittle air
a factory bell clangs, at dawn, and
snow whines under their feet.

Along with stylistic/spiritual encouragements such as these, I shouldn't forget Robert Frost, whose management of line, syntax and unspooling sentence were—along with the Coleridge of things like “Frost at Midnight” or “This Limetree Bower My Prison”—what caught and held my ear when I moved to longer-lined, more meditative poems in a second book and later. What I loved was how his pentameter line—basically iambic but endlessly varied (in sonnet or quatrain or blank verse)—had the sinews and the tang of actual speech, shaping the poem into a species of powerfully directed, yet never shackled mind- and body-talk:

It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.

Since those beginnings I have of course, like everybody else, heard and learned from a great many other poets, both in English and in translation, among them my own elders and contemporaries (and juniors) in Ireland. But the American notes were, I'd say, crucial to my own becoming the kind of poet I have become, to the way, whatever it is, I sound. And since those early days I've added to these prior influences and pleasures the satisfaction of such voices as those of Richard Hugo, Phil Levine, Gerald Stern, Jorie Graham, Adrienne Rich, Mary Oliver, Robert Hass, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Michael Palmer, Margaret Gibson, Charles Wright and many others, a long list still growing. American poetry this century has been a big, bountiful gift to the rest of us. Certainly I've felt nourished by and always grateful for its plenty. Whatever we may shy away from in the American experience or in “the American century”, the vast resources and great generosity of its poetry, its poets, its poems should prompt nothing but applause. It's worth celebrating.